

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Well-timed silence, I have heard, hath more eloquence than speech.

I DIDN'T have the heart to tell him.

Charley was a small man with mild blue eyes and you wondered how he got to be as old as he was without being crushed on the way.

He took an arm-load of books from the cart and put them on the



desk. "I got just sixty days more."

Jackson, who was new in the prison library, began checking them back in. "Sixty days more and then what?"

"I'm going to get myself a little place in a warm climate and take it easy for the rest of my life."

Jackson looked up. "So what are you going to use for money?"

Charley smiled. "I saved some."

Working for the library is the best spot behind these walls. All Charley and I do is wheel our carts from cell to cell, deliver the books to those who want them, and come back to the library with the returns. No sweat at all.

"You got yourself a nest egg someplace?" Jackson asked.

"Fifteen thousand," Charley said and smiled again. "The safest place to keep money is in a bank."

Charley, a small-time stickup man and not too good at his trade, has spent about half his life behind bars. Not all at one time, but it adds up to that.

Jackson pushed aside the pile of books when he was through with them. "You got fifteen thousand? Big deal. This is going to get you a nice place and let you live in the lap of luxury?"

Charley shook his head. "I don't need a big place to be happy. Just a little shack and maybe a couple of acres. I'll be raising just about ev-

erything I need." He smoothed down his gray hair. "To tell you the truth, that's the only thing that kept me going this time—thinking about the place I'll get. I'm fifty-eight now and I'm pretty sick of these big four walls."

Jackson put the date stamps back in the desk drawer. "Look, Charley, if you start buying things, like even a shack and an acre of land, the parole people will want to know where, when, why, and how you got the money, and I don't suppose your money's clean. You'll be back here in no time."

"I won't be on parole, so nobody will be watching me," Charley said. "I'm serving my full time."

Jackson seemed a little surprised that something like that should happen to a quiet man like Charley, so I explained. "Charley was out, but he violated his parole and they brought him back."

Charley nodded. "It was a real hot night so I went into this place for a cool beer. When I came out, this cop who knew I was on parole saw me and that was that because you're not supposed to go into taverns. I got sent back to do the other eighteen months and there's only sixty days left now."

The chow whistle sounded and we went out to join the formation.

The reason I'm in here is be-

cause of income tax irregularity.

I almost expected it to happen some day. You can't run the kind of organization I do and live the full life without leaving some things peeking out at the edges. So the federal accountants sniffed around and nailed me for evading a lousy sixty thousand in taxes. Or was it sixty-five? I forget. Anyway, I guess that was all they thought they could prove. I got handed fourteen months to repent but I'll be out in nine for good behavior.

It's almost like old home week here. I mean when Internal Revenue pulled the string, they caught a lot of fish—like Donovan, Morgan, and Janecki from my organization—and Big Kahn and two of his top boys, and Mike Oakley from the northern part of the state.

The green stuff still greases the way—inside or out—so Big Kahn has a job in the powerhouse reading dials and yawning, and Mike Oakley is in the gardener's shed painting hoe and shovel handles. The color is orange this year.

As I said, I'm in the library, and I first bumped into Charley my second day on the job, really bumped.

I was pushing the cart down the aisles, taking books off the shelves and filling out the request list when I turned a corner, rammed

into old Charley. He just managed to keep from falling backwards, but as it was, the book he carried flew out of his hands and slid down the aisle. Charley went after it like a rabbit, scooped it up, and shoved it protectively under his arm.

I grinned at the action. "Did I break anything?"

"Oh, no," he said quick. "It's all right."

"The way you dived for the book, I thought you expected to see it go down a drain."

He smiled apologetically. "It's just that I feel responsible for these books and I wouldn't want anything to happen to one of them."

I was curious about the one he still held so tight. "What's the title?"

Charley hesitated and then let me get a peek—*The Mill on the Floss*.

I remembered the book and high school required reading. I grinned again. "Who the hell is requesting that?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, nobody actually."

"Don't tell me *you're* going to read it?"

He almost nodded and then seemed to change his mind. "No. I found it on the floor. I was just going to put it back in place."

It was about a week later, after

we'd cleaned up the library for the day and were waiting for the chow whistle, that Charley told me about the account number and about Margie.

"About twelve years ago I decided it was time to think of the future," Charley said. "I made fair money on my jobs, but I always spent it. I had nothing to show for all the years except my record, so I decided I'd better start putting aside at least part of what I made. I didn't want to end up some day just a bum on the street, you know. So I started looking for someplace where I could put money where it would be safe—in case I should happen to be put out of circulation for a while again—and I found out about these number accounts in some banks. You ever heard of them?"

I kept myself from smiling. Had I ever heard of them? I had half a dozen and even one in Switzerland, but I said, "No, can't say that I have."

"They're real secret," Charley said. "You just get a number and that's your account. You deposit money to that number and nobody—except for one or two of the bank officials—knows who the account belongs to. Even then, those bank officials will take any name you give them with a straight face. All they care about is the number and

the money you put in their bank."

"Some people are like that," I said.

Charley agreed. "So what I started doing was building up a nest egg. Like I'd pull a job and then send part of it, or sometimes all, to the account number in San Francisco and that's how I come to have fifteen thousand."

"And now you're going to buy the little shack and live all by yourself on some forgotten acre?"

Charley hesitated. "Well, not exactly alone. There's Margie."

"Who's Margie?"

Charley seemed a little embarrassed. "She's a girl I met while I was out this last time. She danced in this chorus, but the show folded and she was out of a job. I helped her here and there, and we got to like each other. I was a little older than she was, but we got along fine."

I looked out of the window. "I suppose you told her all about your number account?"

Charley nodded. "Just before I got caught on the parole violation."

"And arranged things so that she could take money out?"

Charley became slightly aggressive. "We were going to get married, Mr. Regan. Suppose something happened to me? I could live to be ninety, but you never know. So what good would all that

money do if it's tied up in the bank and she can't touch it?"

Charley had mentioned before that on visiting day the only person who ever came to see him was his brother.

"How come she doesn't see you now and then?" I asked.

"Well," Charley said, "we decided that if I should happen to get caught for anything there shouldn't be any contact between us because somebody might connect the two of us together and find out about the bank account. It's still stolen money, you know, and it could get confiscated."

"She writes to you?"

"No," Charley said. "That would be a contact too, Mr. Regan."

I studied my nails. "Have you told her about your little dream of retirement?"

"Sure," Charley said. "She said she hates the cities and she's always wanted to garden."

"What's Margie's last name?"

"Margie Del Monico," Charley said. "She sometimes used the professional name of Gloria Fontaine too, but she told me that Del Monico is her real name."

I could just see Margie Del Monico weeding carrots and onions.

The whistle blew and we left the library.

I got to know Charley better

during the next few weeks. Like I said, he'd been in this place off and on for half his life so he knew the ropes. I had him running errands for me, little things here and there. He would have done them for nothing, but I always saw to it that he got a few extra things, like maybe candy or cigars.

Eventually I sent Charley to the warden's secretary with a carton of cigarettes and he came back with a couple of forged passes so that I could arrange a meeting with Big Kahn and Mike Oakley in the library.

I talked to them about our organizations and what I had in mind.

Big Kahn shook his head. "I like things the way they are, Regan. We haven't had any trouble with each other in fifteen years."

Oakley agreed. "The three of us got the state split nice and even and with exact boundaries. Why don't we just leave it that way?"

"Because times change," I said, "and big fish eat little fish."

Big Kahn took the cigar out of his mouth. "I don't get you."

"Look, boys," I said, "we're doing fine now, but we're inside a Chinese wall. It's going to crumble one of these days. There are some pretty big organizations outside. They're expanding, and they're not going to stop at the state border."

Big Kahn nodded reluctantly. "There's something to that. I been watching the national picture some. So what do we do to protect ourselves? Rally round the state flag?"

"That isn't strong enough," I said. "A handshake all around isn't going to hold up if a storm or temptation comes. We'd each still be looking out for Number One."

"So what then?" Oakley asked.

"Consolidation," I said. "Legitimate consolidation. We make ourselves a corporation."

Oakley rubbed his jaw. "With shares and stuff? A board of directors?"

"Why not?" I said.

Big Kahn grinned. "With a president who gets a nice salary and a juicy bonus? And who are we going to elect to this cushy job?"

Oakley thought some more about the whole deal. "Maybe you got something there, Regan, but it's going to be one hell of a complication to make one business out of three. Just with my own little enterprises I had to switch to computers to keep up with the times."

"I didn't expect that we could form the corporation just by snapping our fingers," I said, "but we all got high-priced accountants and lawyers and we'll let them crack their heads together for a while and come up with something that

we can all sign without quibbling."

After they left, Charley helped me fill my book cart.

"I didn't know what to expect when you first came here," he said. "I was surprised."

"Surprised about what?"

"I mean you always had your picture in the paper and you got this reputation for being tough, but I never even heard you raise your voice so far."

"Look, Charley, there's lots of ways to be tough besides growling. Most of the physical days are over except maybe for some of the young punks who see too many old movies. Besides, most of the stuff I deal in now is legitimate."

After we filled the cart, I said, "Charley, you still got this account in San Francisco?"

"That's right."

I patted a few books into line. "I been figuring a deal like that might come in handy for myself. I don't suppose that every bank handles a thing like that?"

"I guess not."

"Maybe I could open an account in your bank, Charley. What did you say the name of the place is?"

Charley hesitated.

I grinned. "What's the matter, Charley? Don't you trust me?"

He seemed a little embarrassed. "It isn't that, Mr. Regan. You just got to be cautious. Even if you

trust people," he added quietly.

I think I looked hurt. "So what could I do to you even if I knew the name of your bank? You still got the account number and you'll keep that to yourself."

"That's right," Charley said. "No hard feelings?"

"Of course not, Charley. We're still friends."

He relented a little. "I guess I can tell you the name of the bank. It's the West Coast Maritime."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind when I get out." I fiddled with the books again. "It just come to me, Charley. Suppose you forget the number of the account?"

"I don't," Charley said firmly.

"You could accidentally bump your head. Amnesia. Those things happen."

Charley smiled. "I'm not worried about anything like that. And even if it did happen, Margie would remember the number. She's got it written down."

"Pieces of paper have been lost before."

"Well, even if she lost it and I forgot the number, I'd still have it written . . ." He stopped.

I sighed. "You got a slip of paper in your pocket? Or maybe hidden somewhere in your cell? That's not smart, Charley. Suppose it turns up in one of the shake-downs and suppose somebody is

smart enough to figure out what the numbers mean?"

Charley shook his head. "No. They won't find it. Not on me or in my cell."

Not on him or in his cell? Where else did Charley travel?

My eyes went to the library shelves. I smiled.

I hung back when Charley took his cart out, then went back to the shelves. I stopped in the fiction section and pulled out our one copy of *The Mill on the Floss*. The stamped date inside told me that the last time it had been taken out was in 1913.

I thumbed the pages slow and there it was on page 186—the number C-165 in ink.

On Monday, visiting day, Harry Honeck, my lawyer, came to see me. I asked him about my kids—Tommy, who's eleven, and Diana, who's nineteen and a sophomore at State University.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked. "Don't they write?"

"Sure they write," I said. "So does my wife. But you get to see them once in a while and I like direct reports."

"Well," Harry said, "Tommy's got a mosquito bite on his left elbow and Diana's last date was two minutes and sixteen seconds late."

"Okay, wise man," I said. "So change the subject."

"Did you talk to Big Kahn and Oakley?"

I nodded. "We had our first meet. They're mulling things over, but I think we got a sell."

"Good," Harry said. "It'll be to everybody's advantage. I know the American Dream still exists, but only as a dream. The day of the individual is over. Nowadays it's the team, the company, the corporation."

"Harry," I said, "I got a little work for you." I gave him Charley's account number and explained the situation.

He rubbed his jaw. "Just what do you want to find out?"

"How much money is in the account."

"That might be a little trouble."

"But we know how to get around things like that, don't we, Harry?"

He grinned. "Suppose it's still all there? Suppose Margie Del Monico is really still waiting with a copy of *Organic Gardening* in her loyal little hand? You'll eat your hat?"

"No," I said, "*The Mill on the Floss*." But I didn't have to.

On the next visiting day, Harry showed up again. "There's only one hundred and one dollars in Charley's account."

"Hell," I said, "why didn't she take it all?"

"That's the minimum you need to keep the account open. I guess she wanted to leave it active in case somebody got curious and tried to find out whether it still existed. You want me to track down this Del Monico or Fontaine?"

"Forget it. She probably grabbed the money twenty-four hours after Charley got sent back here. She could be anywhere in the Fifty by now."

Harry left five minutes later and when I got back to the library, Charley was sweeping up and it was almost time to close.

He looked up at the wall calendar. "If nothing goes wrong, I ought to be out by Monday. That's three days before Christmas." He smiled. "From now on I'm going to spend all my Christmases on the outside."

"Sure, Charley," I said.

Monday was a cold and dark day. From the library window, I could see Charley walk across the windy yard, holding down his hat, and carrying the small suitcase. The gates opened and he went through them into the outside world.

Big Kahn, Oakley, and I had another meeting—this time in the gardener's shed—and we decided to give our lawyers and accountants the go-ahead to draw up plans for the merger. If we liked

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what we saw, and I thought that we all would, we would put the final okay on the consolidation.

"I'm still thinking about who's for president of this organization," Big Kahn said. "What we need is the brainy type." He buffed his nails and grinned.

Oakley felt his pockets for cigarettes and discovered he was out. He turned. "Say, Charley, get me a pack of . . ."

He stopped. "Hell, I forget that Charley isn't with us any more."

"A sweet little guy," Kahn said. "Give you the shirt off his back."

Oakley agreed. "Practically had the run of this place, being as he spent so much of his life here."

Kahn nodded. "He'd show up in the powerhouse off and on and we'd talk. Did you know that Charley had a secret nest egg of fifteen thousand bucks?"

"Everybody did," Oakley said. "But do you know how much that lousy dame left him? One hundred and one dollars. Account number L-372, it was."

"No," Kahn said. "It was account number B-438. I happened to come around this generator once and bumped into Charley and the book he was carrying flew out of his hands. *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, it was."

Oakley shook his head. "Hell, no. I bumped into him coming around

the tool shed and the book was *Timon of Athens*."

"Look," Big Kahn said firmly. "I ought to know what Charley's account number was. I had fifteen thousand bucks slipped into number B-438."

"Damnit," Oakley snapped. "It was L-372 and my lawyer put fifteen thou . . ."

There was a silence.

Big Kahn and Oakley eyed each other and they began to color.

I had the feeling there was no Margie Del Monico and there never had been. How many other accounts with one hundred and one dollars had Charley opened in San Francisco? Or was it his brother who handled that part of the job?

I could understand how Big Kahn and Oakley felt. It wasn't the money; it was the principle of the thing.

I was one of Charley's suckers too, number C-165, but there was no point in admitting it out loud.

Instead I clicked my tongue sadly. "Don't tell me that two smart big-time operators like you let a little gray-haired doll like Charley make fools of you? For shame. How will this sound if it ever gets out?"

They looked at me.

I suddenly had the feeling that I was going to be elected the president of a large new corporation.